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Venezuela: Government Reforms Needed to Fix the Venezuelan Food Crisis

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on the northern coast of South America was a thriving country, and used to be one of the richest countries in all of South America. However, changes in the world's economies have seriously hurt Venezuela, and this has resulted in a massive food crisis that is currently occurring in Venezuela. The Venezuelan people are starving, as they struggle to find food and are forced to stay hungry many nights due to this dire situation. A series of reforms are needed in order to resurrect Venezuela's economy and to feed the Venezuelan people again.

Venezuela currently has a population of 31,304,016 people ("Venezuela", *CIA World Factbook*). Venezuela is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean as well as the Caribbean Sea. Its neighboring countries include Colombia, Brazil, Guyana, and Trinidad & Tobago. The total land area of Venezuela is 882,050 sq. km ("Venezuela", *CIA World Factbook*). As Venezuela has started to move away from an agricultural economy to a more industrialized economy, there has also been a shift in the rural and urban population. Currently in Venezuela, 89.1% of the population lives in the urban part of the country while only 10.9% lives in the rural part ("Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic Of)"). The Venezuelan family consists of an average of 3.8 people. Currently, over 40% of the people in Venezuela are between the ages of 25-54 while 27.36% of the population is between the ages of 0-14 ("Venezuela" *CIA World Factbook*). The life expectancy in Venezuela is 70 years for men and 79 years for women ("Venezuela", *BBC*). The Venezuelan people are mostly educated as they have a literacy rate of over 97%. Yet they have an unemployment rate (ages 15-24) of 14.6%.

Venezuela over the years has transformed into an economy that has become solely reliant on one resource: oil. Venezuela has proven to have one of the deepest oil reserves in the whole world. Yet as the country became more dependent on oil, it stopped producing as much food which resulted in Venezuela having to import most of their food to feed its people. Due to their vast oil reserves, they were able to export the oil, and import the necessary amount of food. This was the main way they got food, as only 3.06% of Venezuela's land is arable which is one of the reasons their agriculture is so limited ("Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic Of)"). Since Venezuela's economy has become so reliant on oil, their economy is extremely susceptible to the massive swings in oil prices. Thus, as the prices of oil goes down, Venezuela's economy tumbles as their major export is not worth as much.

This fluctuation in oil prices has resulted in a massive food crisis that is currently occurring in Venezuela. As the prices of oil have gone down, Venezuela has not been able to import as much food. Due to the inability of Venezuela to import an adequate amount of food for the people, the people have started to starve. A lack of food for the massive demand in Venezuela has resulted in hyperinflation in the country as the value for food has skyrocketed. Currently in Venezuela, the inflation rate stands at 24,571%

("Venezuela-Economic Indicators"). These incredibly high food prices have made it nearly impossible for the Venezuelan people to afford food to feed their families.

A country that was once one of the most developed countries in South America, now sees its people struggling and suffering. Venezuela has many aid workers coming to the country to help the people. Currently in Venezuela, over 11% of the population is facing acute malnourishment, a rate which is higher than the 10% benchmark set by the United Nations, which qualifies this as a food crisis ("Venezuela's Hunger Crisis Is for Real"). Many of the people have resorted to desperate measures to feed themselves such as sending children to beg, selling assets for food, or eating food from garbage bins.

The food crisis has reached such a state where Venezuelans reported losing an average of almost 24 pounds over the last year. Due to the food crisis in Venezuela, over 87% of the population now lives in poverty. This is a rise from the 48% that the poverty rate was in 2014 ("Venezuelans Are Starving amid Economic Crisis, Food Shortages"). As the country continues to struggle to feed their starving population, people are starting to flee the country as well. The net migration rate in Venezuela is now -1.2 migrants for every 1000 people ("Venezuela", *CIA World Fact Book*). It's estimated that close to 5,000 Venezuelans are leaving their homes on a daily basis ("Venezuela Deploys Soldiers to Markets to Check Prices"). There seems to be no signs of improvement for the Venezuelan people as this problem continues to persist and hurt the Venezuelan people. The inability of Venezuela to import enough food, as well as the high demand has resulted in food prices that have risen steeply. These high prices have made it near impossible for the people to afford food. Venezuela's agricultural economy is quite limited, and isn't nearly enough to support the whole population of Venezuela.

As this food crisis worsens in Venezuela, it becomes increasingly more evident that Venezuela's government has been ineffective in trying to adequately solve this problem. The Venezuelan government is currently a republic controlled by the President. The leader of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013 was Hugo Chavez. He brought many socialist policies to Venezuela. After Chavez left, Nicholas Maduro was elected as president. Under Maduro, Venezuela saw the price of oil drop severely, and due to this Venezuela's economy suffered greatly as that is Venezuela's main export. Last year, Venezuela saw their GDP (Gross Domestic Product) reduce by 13.2% ("Venezuela-Economic Indicators"). President Maduro has tried many tactics such as currency devaluation as well as rising the petrol prices to combat the food crisis. Maduro has also sent troops to control the prices at the grocery stores and has increased the minimum wage to help the people afford food. Yet these policies are seen as insufficient in addressing the issue and is criticized for increasing inflation ("Venezuela Deploys Soldiers to Markets to Check Prices"). Many countries including the United States have offered to send food to Venezuela to help with the ongoing crisis. However, Maduro has declined these offers and refuses to ask for any help, even though it is desperately needed for the Venezuelan people.

Despite these small changes, the Venezuelan government led by Maduro has yet to make any major reforms to try to help the country's economy. It has become evident that Maduro refuses to admit the cause of this crisis which is the ineffective policies put forth by his government. As a result, Maduro has continued to deflect blame on other countries and refuses to admit that they have a food crisis. Maduro fears losing his power, and as a result he uses his military to try and maintain control in Venezuela ("Venezuela Deploys Soldiers to Markets to Check Prices"). While other countries such as the United States have tried to encourage Venezuela to take more action, the government has refused to do so as Maduro feels that they are threatening his power due to the criticism of Venezuela's government by the

United States (“Venezuelans Are Going Hungry. Why Won’t the Country Accept Aid”). For the Venezuelan government to act to feed their starving population, the allies of Venezuela such as China, Russia, and Cuba need to start pushing Maduro and his government to start to make real changes to their country. Then only will there be major reforms made by the Venezuelan government.

To aid the Venezuelan people during the food crisis, Venezuela’s agricultural industry needs to be revitalized. The most common crops that Venezuela produce and export include corn, sorghum, sugarcane, rice, and bananas. Venezuela is in a tropical climate with hot and humid weather. The highlands in Venezuela enjoy a much more moderate temperature, while the central part of the country is relatively flat. In the northern part of the country, the Orinoco belt holds the oil sands where Venezuela has one of the world’s deepest oil reserves. The drilling for oil has also hurt the environment in many places, making it very difficult to be able to grow crops effectively and safely in the country (“Venezuela”, *CIA World Fact Book*).

The government needs to implement more effective policies in order to help Venezuela produce more food. This can be done by the government to reform an inefficient system that is in place right now which is seriously harming the people in Venezuela. Currently in Venezuela, the government has control of the agricultural industry. The vast majority of the agricultural land in Venezuela is owned by the government or a small group of people, while the farmers don’t have control of the land. Under Chavez and Maduro, the government had nationalized most of the agricultural land, giving the farmers very little power or incentive to continue farming. Land redistribution was promised, yet the government has still not delivered on their promise. Along with the land, the government has complete control over the agricultural food chain including the producing, processing, and distributing (“Venezuela’s Paradox: People Are Hungry, but Farmers Can’t Feed Them”). The supplies that the farmers need such as animal feed and fertilizers are all imported into Venezuela. However, the imports are so expensive due to inflation, that the farmers can’t afford these supplies and thus can’t run their farm successfully. The government, by controlling the prices of the feed and other important supplies for farmers, have made it very hard for farmers to grow food.

The main goal of the Venezuelan government should be to stabilize the government in Venezuela. Maduro has attempted to do this by handing over control of parts of the economy to the military. Yet all this has done is increase distrust in the people (“Venezuela Deploys Soldiers to Markets to Check Prices”). The government needs to focus instead on increasing the supply of food in Venezuela, thus bringing down the prices and ultimately making it easier for people to access food. The Venezuelan government needs to incentivize more people to work in agriculture. They can do this by distributing more land to the farmers and giving them grants in the forms of animal feeds and fertilizers so that they can run their farm successfully. While the Venezuelan government had relied heavily on oil, it is needed for the Venezuelan government to divert some attention to the agricultural industry in order to rebuild it.

In addition to incentivizing farmers with grants for necessary supplies, the government needs to allow the farmers to be educated in more efficient farming techniques as well. For example, an alternative to pay for the very expensive imported fertilizer is to use natural fertilizer such as animal manure. Composted manure can be very effective in helping crops grow properly and can be adjusted based on the necessary amount of nutrients that are required and the NPK levels needed for different crops. Additionally, due to the lack of available land in Venezuela, the farmers can be educated in vertical farming techniques to grow crops year-round and more effectively. Many people who live in the cities can also use this

technique to grow food. These are all programs that can help Venezuela have a sustainable agricultural program for a longer period of time. Nevertheless, these changes will take time and money in order to implement, and it will also take more time for these policies to have an impact.

In order to provide immediate relief, it is important for the Venezuelan government to allow aid from foreign countries to quickly bring much needed food security for the Venezuelan people. Organizations such as the Catholic Church as well as other countries such as Colombia and the United States have offered aid. Yet, the government has refused to acknowledge the agricultural crisis, as Maduro is scared to lose power and is too proud to admit that there is a crisis in Venezuela. Instead they blame the food insecurity on opposition sabotage or policies from the United States that have hurt Venezuela (“Venezuelans Are Going Hungry. Why Won’t the Country Accept Aid”). In fact, Venezuela’s government offered aid to other countries such as Ecuador during the 2016 Earthquake, even though its own country was struggling to make ends meet. Due to the ineffectiveness of the government in handling these problems, there are many refugees who leave Venezuela and seek refuge in neighboring ones such as Colombia and Brazil. While sustainable agricultural practices will help form a sustainable food chain, it is important for the Venezuelan people to have immediate relief from the struggle.

Even if the government were to start acting there are some barriers for the government. One of which is that the government will find it hard to help people on the smaller level as their reforms will only have a larger impact. To help affect the individual people, it is important that the government helps aid organizations that can go and make an impact on the microlevel. They can also try giving tax relief to some companies so that they can come into the country and try and help resurrect the economy. While the government has tried to suppress the people, it is important that the people still fight to help bring the lasting change that the Venezuelan people so desperately need.

As Venezuela’s situation has emerged as one of the worst food crises in recent memory, it is imperative that a series of reforms are implemented to support the Venezuelan people during this crisis. As Venezuela is not able to feed its people, it becomes important that these reforms be done quickly. There needs to be land redistribution in Venezuela, to give the Venezuelan farmers more control of their farm. Additionally, the Venezuelan farmers should be more educated in more efficient farming techniques to replace the expensive supplies that the farmers are not able to afford. These techniques will be effective going forward; however, for there to be change in Venezuela, the government needs to be willing to reform its practices. It needs to accept foreign aid from other countries to help their people immediately, while also making reforms to help the country. With these changes, the government can help feed the Venezuelan people once again and bring it back to the rich country that it once was.

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